

EXPANDING AND ENRICHING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE WEST

EXPLORING THE WEST

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Photographs of Cowboys

Though there are many images of cowboys in popular culture, not many exist of working cowboys in the 19th century. The photographs were taken at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Examine them closely before answering the questions below.



Source: Group of cowboys and their horses, Sheridan, Wyo. photo by H.R. Locke on B. & M. R.R. [1890?] Denver Public Library, Western History Collection. [Call number: Z-2580].



Source: Black cowboy and horse [between 1890 and 1920?] Western History/Genealogy Department, Denver Public Library. [Call Number: X-21563].



Source: Bunch of genuine old time cowboys and bronco busters at Denver, Colorado. Solomon D. Butcher. 1905.

Nebraska State Historical Society. [Digital ID: nbhips 12615]



Source: Cowboy and a herd of cattle in Cherry County, Nebraska. Solomon D. Butcher. 1889. Nebraska State Historical Society [Digital ID: nbhips 14270].



Source: Cowboy at work, TX, c. 1905. Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Erwin Smith photo.
<http://historyproject.ucdavis.edu/khapp.php?SlideNum=2721>

Questions:

1. What can you learn about cowboys from these photographs?
2. Cowboys didn't walk around with digital cameras. Who do you think shot these photographs? Do they seem posed? If so, does that affect what you can learn from the images?





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Canadian Cowboys

Cattle ranching began in Canada in the early 1870s. The Canadian government so supported ranching that in 1881 it passed regulations that allowed any individual or ranch company to lease up to 100,000 acres for the cost of one cent per acre, per year. In many ways, the Canadian cowboy enjoys the same mythical status as he does in the United States (see Calgary Stampede in Urban Growth unit). The passage below describes some of the similarities and differences between the Canadian and American cowboy.

Canadian cowboys appeared very similar to the cowhands across the border in the United States. A broad-brimmed hat for shelter from sun and rain, snug jeans, and high-heeled boots were standard garb. Although unpolished by the urban standards of Montreal or Quebec, Alberta cowboys could likely read and write. . . .

Ranch hands in Canada stand alone among the cowboys of the Americas in having very little negative imagery associate with them. In fact, Canadians go to considerable pains to distinguish their "civilized" and cultured West from the violent, rough-and-tumble frontier to their south. . . . Historian L.G. Thomas noted of the not-so-wild Canadian West that "the body is American but the spirit is English."

Nineteenth-century sources recorded considerable differences in cowboy country north and south of the Forty-ninth Parallel. . . . The *Calgary Herald* in 1884 contrasted the cowboys of Canada and the United States. "The rough and festive cowboy of Texas and Oregon has no counterpart here. Two or three beardless lads wear jingling spurs and ridiculous revolvers and walk with a slouch, [but] the genuine Alberta cowboy is a gentleman."

Source: Slatta, Richard. *Cowboys of the Americas*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. 51.

Questions:

1. What were some of the perceived similarities and differences between American and Canadian cowboys?
2. How does the idea of a Canadian West, full of cowboys, complicate the myth of the American West?





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Indian Cowboys and Cowboy Indians

From the days of the Spanish missions, Native Americans in the West have been cowboys. In fact, cattle ranching continues to be a source of income for many Native Americans today. The notion of "cowboys and Indians" as warring enemies denies a long and more complex history. The two passages below present different aspects of the legacy of cattle ranching for Native Americans.

Passage One

[By the 1960s] cattle ranching had become ensconced in many western American Indian communities. On nearly all northern plains reservations and in many of the southwestern reservations, it ranked as a major pastime. [Many reservations] included cattle ranching as a major element of their economy. . . .

Grazing lands remained by far the most significant type of land on Indian reservations. Effective use of this resource continued to be a central question for future Native development. In both 1950 and 1966, for example, income from grazing lands provided the biggest single source of income for Indian communities. . . .

[One historian] witnessed the emergence of "a new Navajo idealâ—the cowboyâ—and," he added, "the cowboy serves as a platform from which new and non-traditional aspirations can be formed. [The young Navajo man] views himself as basically a cowboy who can rope, ride and participate in rodeo, a man who knows something of cattle and cattle lore, who dreams of owning cattle and becoming a rancher or cattleman."

When we move beyond cowboy versus Indian, we see that cowboys are Indians, that Indians are cowboys. . . .

Source: Iverson, Peter. *When Indians became Cowboys*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1994. 167, 185, 216

Passage Two

Indian cowboys and ranchers in the modern era face many of the same challenges and problems that their parents and grandparents encountered when cattle were first introduced onto northern Plains reservations. Indian cattle-raising ventures continue to be modest family-run operations. . . . Herds are generally small in size. . . . Many of these small ranchers, consequently, had to find additional employment to make a living. . . .

Financial restraints also help account for the fact that most modern Indian stock-raisers on the northern Plains attempt to graze their herds on pastures year-round. . . . The result of inadequate feeding practices have been disastrous to Indian cattle ranchers. . . . Indian ranchers who run cattle on pasture grasses year-round, consequently, often suffer lower cow-calf yields and higher cattle mortality rates.

An even greater obstacle to Indian cattle ranching (and hay-raising for that matter) remains the issue of leasing. Non-Indian leasees, carrying on a tradition dating back to the 1891 leasing act, continue to run cattle on the majority of reservation lands on the northern Plains. On the Pine Ridge reservation, for example, nearly two-thirds of the reservation in 1963 was devoted to ranching, but only one-third was controlled by Indian ranchers. . . .

Thus, cattle ranching on the northern Plains continues to exert tremendous influence and pressure on native peoples. . . .

Source: Britten, Thomas. "Indian Cowboys of the Northern Plains." In *The Cowboy Way*. Ed. Paul Carlson. Texas Tech University Press, 2000. 55-59.

Questions:

1. In what ways has cattle ranching had both a positive and negative influence on some Native American communities?
2. Why might non-Indian cattle ranchers have wanted to lease reservation land for grazing beginning in the 1890s?





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African American Cowboys

In classic Westerns, cowboys have almost exclusively been portrayed as White. However, in reality, there were African-American, Mexican, and Native American cowboys. The passage below traces how African Americans became cowboys in the late 19th century.

The Civil War in Texas had the unexpected effect of creating the African American cowboy. Within sixteen years of annexation to the United States, Texas joined the Confederacy. Successful ranchers formed regiments and went off to war, leaving behind their wives, children, and African American slaves to maintain and preserve the welfare of the ranches. Most of the 'outdoor' work became the responsibility of the African Americans. Some African Americans took this opportunity to escape to the western frontier of Texas. Others used the opportunity to acquire the skills of cowhands. But maintaining the cattle herds and claiming ownership of the cattle on the open range was difficult at best, and during the war it was impossible. There were just too few 'hands' to do the work. Barbed wire had yet to be invented, so the cattle continued to roam the grasslands and returned to the wild. Fear of the Indians was still a major concern, but giving firearms to African Americans was unthinkable. . . .

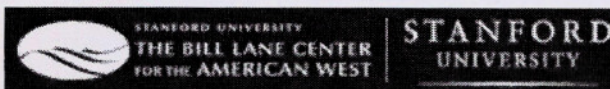
Finding their herds decimated, the primary concern of the owners was once again acquiring horses, rounding up the wild cattle, and putting on their marks to build herds. . . . But with the 1865 emancipation proclamation in Texas, the ranchers lost a primary source of labor. . . .

Free African Americans who had held together the ranches of their owners during the war had learned the skills it took to work with cattle and horses. They could top off a horse, throw a cow, pull calves from mud bogs, and pop those 'horns out of the brush. Their skills were now in demand as ranchers worked to build their herds. The ranchers needed help, lots of it, to reclaim the cattle from the wilds. So these cowboys went to work, and the law required a wage be paid.

Source: Massey, Sara R. Ed. *Black Cowboys of Texas*. Texas A&M University Press, 2000. 95.

Questions:

1. Why did the Civil War have the "unexpected effect of creating the African American cowboy?"
2. Why do you think cowboys have historically been portrayed as white?



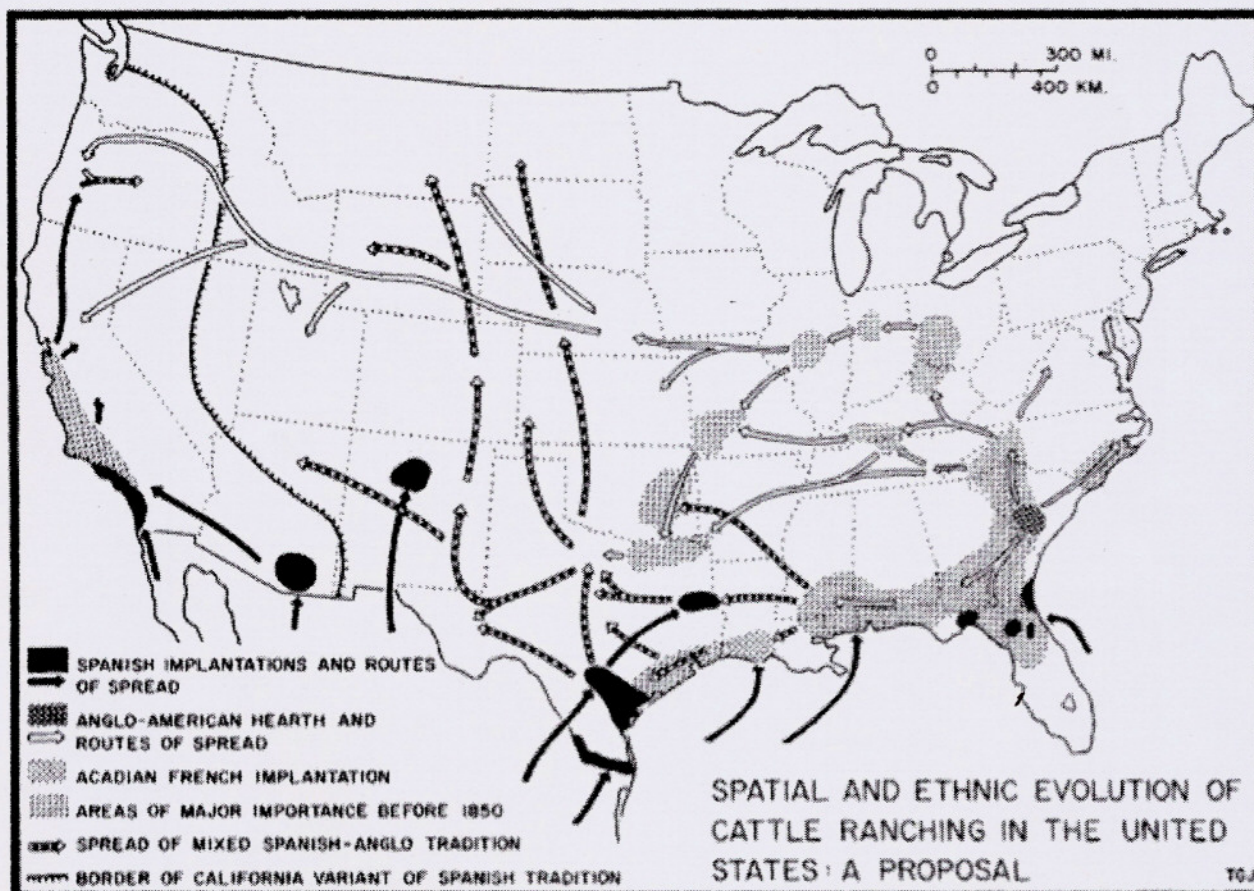
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Vaqueros

Contrary to popular belief, the first cowboys were Indian, not American. The cattle ranching that later emerged in the West was a blend of Mexican practices and Anglo-American practices, but many of the techniques and terms that were used in American cowboy culture came from the Spanish. The map below proposes possible routes where the various cattle ranching practices may have blended. In Mexico, the cowboy is called a 'vaquero.' The passage below discusses the history of the vaquero in the Western Hemisphere.



Source: Jordan, Terry G. "Early Northeast Texas and the Evolution of Western Ranching." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. (67)1, 1977. 66-87.

The earliest mounted men herding cattle in the Western Hemisphere bear little resemblance to the romantic,

dime store cowboy. By the middle decades of the sixteenth century, the proliferation of livestock in the New World had caused an overabundance of cattle. . . . Such large numbers "gave rise to customary rights for killing the animals" in many parts of the Spanish empire and helped create the gaucho (Argentina), vaquero (Mexico), llanero (Venezuela), and huaso (Chile) equestrian cultures. While such horsemen performed both legal and illegal activities, their status in Spanish society held constant. Vaqueros working on ranchos or missions were often individuals of mixed races (mestizos or mulattos) and, "in the eyes of most . . . Spaniards, nothing more than a poor laborer on horseback". . . .

The vaquero's transplantation to the northern reaches of New Spain did little to alter his social standing. The movement of Spanish settlers into what we now know as the American west commenced in the 1590's and continued for the next two centuries. . . . The vaquero of Mexico became "an integral part of spreading cattle-related culture". . . . During the 1700's, in an effort to increase and supplement their labor force, Franciscans trained mission Indians in herding tactics and other chores. . . .

The arrival of Anglos in Texas (and points farther west) after the 1820's produced a "fusion" of two cattle herding cultures. The union proved both fruitful and tempestuous. The Mexican-Anglo ranching marriage provided much of the know-how used during the cattle drives of the 1860's and 1870's, but the relationship destroyed the economic status and lifestyle of many rancheros in Texas and California. The replacement of one group by another at the pinnacle of the cattle industry fostered the myth of the "purely" American cowboy and cattleman.

Source: Iber, Jorge. "Vaqueros in the Western Cattle Industry." In *The Cowboy Way: An Exploration of History and Culture*. Ed. Paul H. Carlson. Texas Tech University Press, 2000. 22-24.

Questions:

1. The word "proposal" appears in the title of the map, and in the article that accompanies it, the author admits that "value judgments and educated guesses abound in the map." What, then, is the purpose of such a map?
2. How did the Spanish regard vaqueros? Why?
3. According to this author, what fostered the myth of a purely American cowboy? What other factors contributed to the rise of the cowboy myth?

